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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ideological changes which have influenced American education during the past 25 years. Gradual shifting of values and fluctuating attitudes are examined in the broad areas of authority, educational theory, the idea of merit, and moral perspectives. It is pointed out that public disastisfaction with the schools has been felt for well over a decade and that it has been responsive to the actual vicissitudes of American schooling, specifically the easing of both academic and disciplinary demands. It is also noted that the public's attitude toward schooling is not shared by a great many experts in education, who may agree that there has been a decline in quality, but see this as the price to be paid for universal education. In probing changes in the philosophy of education, an effort is made to clarify the reasons for the loss of consensus as to the functions of the schools and the values they are meant to embody and teach. (JD)

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Twenty-Five Years of American Education:

An Interpretation

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Writing a full half-century ago, Walter Lippman (19) pointed out that every optimistic book written on democracy concludes with a chapter on education. In the years since we have seen no change in the avidness with which Americans--those consummate, ultimate democrats--pursue their optimistic, at times millenial hopes for schooling. Even when we are gloomy, our sadness is that of the disappointed yet ever hopeful lover. A few months ago I participated in the taping of a series of programs, for the National Humanities Center, on the state of American secondary education. Of the five discussants, three were morose, and two ambivalent. For nearly a full day the panel complained about the public schools: their mediocrity, their low standards, the loss of discipline, the flight to the private schools, legislative intrusion, the dearth of science and mathematics teachers, the prevalence of drug use, minimum competence testing (necessary but troubling), the low SAT scores of prospective teachers, and much, much more. Apparently overwhelmed by this catalogue of woes, the moderator concluded by asking the group to comment on what it foresaw for the next ten years. Every face brightened, as the discussants reported their consensus: Things would be far better; demographic trends were favorable; there would be fewer students and we already had in place a splendid educational plant; social pathology showed signs of ebbing; the legislators had at last learned their lessons and were beginning to butt out; SAT scores would soon begin to show a rise, school administrators were feeling more confident; and parents were making themselves heard. All in all we could look forward to a glorious decade.

That peculiar ambivalence has been noted by a number of thoughtful observers of American education. Diane Ravitch (198) has pointed out the swings between utopian zeal on the one hand, and a tendency to blame the schools for "failures" which are not genuinely their responsibility. Indeed, we can note that very ambivalence in Lippman himself. One thinks of him as a writer concerned almost exclusively with the large political issues--foreign policy, the philosophy of democratic government, public opinion--yet to a truly surprising degree he was preoccupied with education, which he saw as vital to a democratic nation, and which he wrote about persistently through a long career. Much of the time his tone is elegiac, as he looks back nostalgically to the triumphs of public education in the past, and as he laments the increasing failure of the schools to teach the Western cultural tradition. And at other times he gives way to urgency, even passion, as in his stirring Phi Beta Kappa oration (19), calling for the nation to resume its great tradition of excellence in education.

During the last quarter-century, American sentiments on the success of education have fallen and risen and fallen, as they so often do, though on the whole they have been more elated than depressed. In the heart of that period, circa 1960 to 1975, we witnessed what can only be called a frenzy of exalted expectations on the prospects of schooling. The present mood is despondent, and I suspect more so than ever before in our history, certainly more so than in the memory of most of us. A great many feel that we are not merely coming down from a high, but that the high is itself to be blamed for the depths in which we now find ourselves--that the reforms of the late 1960's, undertaken

thoughtlessly, giddily, produced the shallowness of learning and ennui of spirit we find so commonly in the schools.

The degree of disaffection amounts almost to disgust. Here is a sampling of opinion compiled in just the last week. The chancellor of a Southern university comments to the New York Times that "the quality of secondary education is just awful"; an eminent political philosopher begins a powerful essay on higher education by writing that "students in our best universities do not believe in anything, and those universities are doing nothing about it, nor can they." (Bloom, 1982) A noted investment banker, being interviewed on our country's loss of economic competitiveness, mentions almost off-handedly that an important part of the problem is our educational system. One of our most distinguished academicians, in a new preface to a classic book on American education, says: "The once proud and efficient public school system of the United States--especially its unique free high school for all--has turned into a wasteland where violence and vice share the time with ignorance and idleness." (Barzun, 19)

Part of us wants to believe that this is rhetorical excess, reflecting the disappointment of those inflated hopes mentioned earlier. Yet the data we now have on American shool achievement tell us precisely the same thing. We have a masterful analysis of these findings by Barbara Lerner (1982), which will put to rest any surviving complacency about our nation's educational system. Her article concentrates on two types of comparisons, historical and international. As to the former, she marshals evidence from a number of studies showing a substantial decline in the competence of American students during the last quarter-century, especially at the high school level.

The decline of SAT scores is by now so well known as to have become a journalistic cliché; but Lerner points out that this key finding is corroborated by almost every other reliable study of the performance of American students then and now. The international comparisons are equally dispiriting. Examining the massive (twelve volumes) research by Torsten Husén's team, Lerner concludes that our country comes off quite poorly: "Out of nineteen tests, we were never ranked first or second; we came in last three times and, if comparisons are limited to other developed nations only, the U.S. ranked at the bottom seven times." (In attempting to discount the poor U.S. performance, the argument is sometimes made that many more of our youngsters remain in school to the senior year; hence we are comparing bodies which differ considerably in academic selectiveness. Lerner examines this argument skeptically, putting particular stress upon the fact that the two countries which have retention rates very close to our own--Japan and Sweden--both score extremely high on these comparisons.[1] The Japanese—to no one's surprise--outscore all others, and it may be worth noting that many observers credit its superb, and very demanding, primary and secondary education for that nation's economic prowess.

Nor is the impression of widespread crime and violence in the schools without equally impressive empirical confirmation. The

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[1]Lerner seems to believe, as I do, that the authors of these studies have gone out of their way to make it difficult to make comparisons, presumably to spare national sensitivities. This fear of invidiousness, though in some ways admirable, should caution us not to take at face value occasional soothing words on the relative quality of American achievement.

most recent large study we have was carried out by NIE (some of its details are reported in Toby, 1980), and it tells us that crime in the schools is substantial. For example, about 7 percent of all junior high school students report having been assaulted within the past month of the survey; a slightly higher number report having been robbed during the preceding month. Well over 10 percent of teachers report being victimized by thefts during that period. This is a topic we will return to a bit later in this essay; I mention these figures now to make the point that the widespread disaffection about American schools is neither hyperbolic nor hysterical nor based on fancy, but is rather rooted in an accurate perception of what the schools--a great many of them--are like.

How shall we understand this apparent decline in both civility and competence? Is there some fault in the national temper? Paul Samuelson believes we may be seeing a diminution of the American work ethic, as a response to more general economic changes in the country. There is a substantial body of opinion which holds that the country "has had it," especially with respect to economic innovation and productivity, the corollary hypothesis being that the slackness often seen in the schools reflects a more general failure of will. We have caught the "English disease," so it is said, and are now experiencing that loss of energy which laid low Great Britain's economy. The good times of the post World War II years took some of the edge off. Economic enterprise, technical innovation, and intellectual drive must have behind them some stimulus to effort or to risk taking; for various reasons, these motives declined in force during the last quarter-century, as an unwarranted self-satisfaction took over the national consciousness.

Another version of this theme stresses cyclical variations, shifts from era to era in the emphasis given certain values. In a seminal essay, Daniel Bell (19) refers to the "issue-attention cycle," referring to the waxing and waning of values over time. Writing in 1972, he notes that a decade earlier "excellence" had been at the center of national concern, and that it had receded, to be replaced by "equality." A decade later, the wheel continues to turn, and we are seeing a renewed interest in excellence--witness the very existence of this Commission--and if not a dethronement of the rampant egalitarianism of a decade ago, at least some signs of a dialectic between the two values. (This is another topic this essay will address.)

Whether one believes that long-range secular trends are at work, or whether we ought to be looking at shorter-range variations, most of us are gradually coming to understand that the variables we want to be looking at are ideological or, if you will, philosophical. One dubious American habit is to see our problems as concrete or "practical" and hence search for technical solutions. That has in fact been a prominent feature of our thinking about the schools during the period in question. It has begun to dawn on us that at least some solutions are to be found in the realm of ideas and ideals, that we will be slow to recover past levels of achievement and decorum without giving some thought to some of the transformations in the American sensibility. In what follows I will try to explore some ways in which "ideological" changes have influenced American education during the last twenty-five years--looking at transformations in four areas: authority, educational theory, the idea of merit, and the movement to modernist values.

I. Authority

If you spend any time at all in the schools, you soon realize that a great many of those nominally in authority have a sense of having lost it. Some feel that loss so keenly that they feel unable to go on, and if they can do so leave the schools, or simply go through the motions until they can retire. About twenty years ago, in the course of doing some research in the secondary schools, I met a junior high school principal who was widely admired, by his staff, his students, and their parents. He ran his school by a sort of omnipresence: He knew all of the children by name, and knew their families, and often their family histories. He tended to make decisions--about discipline, for example--quickly, informally, often intuitively, sometimes taking the child aside to talk with him, sometimes (though less often) by talking to the parents.

A few years later I was surprised to learn that he had resigned as principal, and had decided to return to teaching. I learned that he had left the job because he felt he could not adjust to a new administration, which had determined to set things in order, and was particularly concerned about the free-wheeling manner in which many principals ran their schools. They were being told not to settle so much on the spot, and on their own authority. They were to keep records, to set up fixed procedures, to report things more completely to the central administration, and the like. It did not take this man long to decide that the fun had gone out of the job, and so he returned to teaching, and shortly thereafter to retirement.

This story does not necessarily bring tears to the eyes of the school people I tell it to. They are likely to say that an unfettered principal may be a fine thing so long as he is the salt of the earth, but if he were a petty tyrant, I would then feel somewhat differently, would want some controls, or at least some monitoring and accountability. There is, of course, something to be said for that--indeed it is the traditional argument for bureaucratic and juridical controls, that these provide even-handedness and equity to those under the sway of authority. This is not the place to argue the issue, though it is worth pointing out that in a public school system in a democratic society, there exist other means of recourse given wrongs to be redressed. In any case, the decision of the central school administration to tighten things up had little to do with any wish to assure even-handedness. It had to do entirely with the need to protect the school system against litigation, to comply with an increasing number of Federal regulations, and to meet the demands of activist groups. It is fair to say that the central administration, in wresting authority from the principals, was itself responding to the loss of its own authority, as it was forced to meet the actual and projected demands of other groups and institutions, groups which for the most part had only a special or temporary interest in schools and schooling, and rarely in the question of educational quality.

That sense of lost authority is felt most strongly at the secondary school level. A high school principal may tell you, as one told me, that he finds himself answerable to the students, their parents, his teachers, his superintendent, the school board, the local press, and the rules and regulations coming from the state legislature, the

Congress, and various courts. As it happened, this man is unusually effective and rather enjoyed these challenges, which he took to be a test of his mettle, and a test he could pass easily. But a great many of his colleagues do not have his panache, and faced with a multitude of conflicting pressures, tend to retreat to bureaucratic authority, avoiding decisions and commitments until the proper rules can be found, cited, and applied. That paralysis of authority--genuine authority--is transmitted to teachers and students and others, and soon enough becomes the expected ethos to which everyone accommodates.

The effects are seen most clearly in the area of discipline. The extraordinary growth of litigiousness, and of litigation, meant that school administrations--and ultimately teachers and principals--became gun-shy, fearing that a wrong move would land them in the courts, or on the front pages of the local press. Much of the time, of course, that fear is exaggerated, but there were enough instances of gratuitous litigation to reinforce anyone's caution--or paranoia. In my own school district, a judge took it upon himself to overturn a standard disciplinary penalty meted out in a case of serious vandalism by a high school student. That a case of this sort is taken to court, that a judge decides to accept it, and that he rules in favor of the defendant--all of that suggests a profound change in the atmosphere of education and in the authority of the schools. Gerald Grant (1982) has provided us with some illuminating--and depressing--reports stemming from his extensive survey of American high schools. Some of his observations are worth quoting in full:

> Jurisdiction is so narrowly defined that a student who comes to a school principal after lunch complaining of being beaten up is asked which side of the street he was standing on when the beating occurred. If he was across the street, it would

be out of the school's jurisdiction and hence of no concern to the principal. Often when students need help, teachers are afraid to intervene for fear of legal reprisals. One teacher, explaining why she hadn't interfered with a girl who clawed another in her classroom, said, "You'll only be after trouble if you physically handle them." Another teacher was still shaking as she told us about a group of students who had verbally assaulted her and made sexually degrading comments about her in the hall. When we asked why she didn't report the students, she responded, "Well, it wouldn't have done any good." "Why not?" we pressed. "I didn't have any witnesses," she replied.

These vignettes focus upon the helplessness of teachers, but we should also note the thuggishness of the students depicted. As I have written elsewhere (Adelson, 1981), the loss of authority in the schools could not have come at a worse time for those deputed to run them. Many youngsters remain in the upper grades of high school who would have left in an earlier era; and among these a small but significant number are resentful and fractious. More important still, we have seen a rise in the number and proportion of anti-social adolescents--there was an astonishing increase in all indices of social pathology among the young during the last quarter-century, in assaults, suicides, homicides, drug use, out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The economic demographers--notably Richard Easterlin (1980)--argue that in a crowded youth cohort, that is, when the proportion of the young to the total population is high, we are liable to find a rise in such phenomena, an indirect effect of the demoralization that many youngsters feel when they recognize that their economic prospects are marginal, that they are losing out to more talented competitors in a tight market.[2] There were also larger families, which meant a

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[2]Among the attractions of this hypothesis is that it tests itself. This is the time we should be seeing a decline in some of these indices.

decrease in the number of intellectually able youngsters (Zajonc, 19). Hence, in the post-war era, the schools confronted a horde of youngsters, a large percentage of whom were academically weak and/or antisocial. It was at that very moment that they found themselves stripped of their accustomed powers.

The weakened authority of teachers and principals also led to a weakening of academic demands. Teachers coping with unruly students could not give themselves fully to instruction; those coping unsuccessfully lost the esteem of all students. A demoralization often set in which diminished the will to set and abide by high expectations. Gilbert Sewall (19) says that his study of a large number of high schools persuaded him that in most of them students rather than teachers decide how much work they will do. Students seem to agree; a large number of high school youngsters, when polled, say they are not given enough homework. It seems evident from these and other reports (see of this paper) that during the late 1960's a sense of impotence overcame many of those managing and teaching in the schools, producing in turn that inanition of purpose necessary for sustained academic effort.

Has it happened? It is too early to know, but on the whole the hypothesis is proving out--there is a distinct decline in drug use, an apparent plateau in the suicide rate, a slowing down in the growth rate for youth crime. On the other hand, illegitimate births continue to rise.

The crisis of authority in the university system did not involve discipline--except during moments of upheaval—so much as it involved the erosion or collapse of academic standards. One hardly needs to belavor the matter, since the crisis in the universities was the most publicized set of events in education during the quarter-century we are considering.[3] The academic faculties lost much of their control over curriculum, grading, intellectual standards, and above all the tacit definition of what the university ought to be. Those losses have not been made up.

One might argue, as Robert Nisbet (19) and many others did, that the faculties lost their authority because they did not have a strong definition of the university to begin with, that in particular the specifically pedagogical functions of higher education had been treated by many of them with derision or had at most been given lip service. Hence there was an intellectual flaccidity, a confusion of inner purpose, which left the universities unable to defend themselves against the anti-intellectualism of the student movement. Be that as it may, the events of the late 1960's had as their primary effect--and perhaps as one of their latent purposes--a serious decline in intellectual quality. The social sciences were the most grievously affected, in my view, especially those disciplines, such as psychology

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[3]Interviewed in 1970, shortly before his death, the great American historian Richard Hofstader, said that we were living in an "age of rubbish," and it is easy to see what he had in mind as one re-reads much of the mawkish, vulgar, and self-serving commentary of that period. On the other hand, the crisis also produced some remarkably fine writing, as for example, many of the essays published by Daedalus in a vast two-volume survey of American academic thought published in 1974 to 1975.

and sociology, which proved particularly attractive to the youngsters of the 1970's. One found that credit was given in courses where neither work nor attendance was required; there were a number of embarrassing moments when departments discovered that "A" grades had been given to students who had dropped out of the course at the beginning of the semester. In some cases instructors guaranteed an "A" grade for any student enrolling, either as a protest against the Vietnam War, or merely against the competitiveness of academic life. Some courses in psychology became therapy groups, or other exercises in self-expression. In other instances the subject matter was entirely politicized; one of my sons, attending an Ivy League university, found that the introductory psychology course (and the only one given that year) consisted exclusively of denunciations of capitalism. To be sure, these cases were in the minority and the faculty as a whole, even in affected departments, did not participate nor even approve. There was a great deal of muttering and hand-wringing, but little action taken. There proved to be little spirit in most departments to impose restraints on the faculty, for fear of diminishing academic freedom. It was all seen as a kind of fever which could be left untreated, since it would ultimately run its course. The uninfected faculty thereupon retreated even further into research, or specialized graduate education, and withdrew even more decisively from the pedagogical missions of the university.

We now find that a blessed amnesia has begun to settle over us, and with it a tendency to minimize the impact of that period, on the grounds that the consequences were limited. In fact they were extensive, enduring, and have yet to be repaired. Consciously or otherwise, many teachers simply gave up requiring sustained effort from their students.

In many instances this was done cynically, in others out of despair. Some teachers came to believe that the entire academic enterprise had been so compromised by the failure to resist student demands, that the game was no longer worth the candle. In other instances, a mood of manic zeal persuaded some teachers that they were living in a Golden Age so far as student achievement was concerned. There has never been a more self-celebratory moment in the history of American higher education. College authorities told anyone who would listen that they were privileged to be teaching the most talented group of students the planet has ever seen; many students solemnly agreed.

That self-congratulation produced--or perhaps merely rationalized--the notorious grade inflation which dominated higher education, and which persists. Each year GPA's rose, ultimately to dizzying heights. In some universities the average GPA was at a level which had once been reserved for the highest academic honors, which forced a change in longstanding criteria for the awarding of such honors. One saw the same phenomenon, less concretely but far more vividly, in reading the letters of recommendation written by university teachers about students applying to graduate and professional schools. Where a few years before these letters had on the whole been positive but measured, they were now uniformly euphoric. During this period I served a term as chairman of admissions to our graduate program in clinical psychology and, wishing to test the hypothesis that these letters were no longer credible, decided to read every one of the more than one thousand recommendations submitted that year, to see whether I could find anything other than words of extreme praise. As it happens I did find one, from a most unusual source--the abbot of a seminary who said

in no uncertain terms that the applicant, one of his seminarians, was mistaken in his view of himself, and of his readiness for graduate school. Every other letter was enthusiastic, and a great many were ecstatic, claiming that the applicant was the most brilliant in the last five or ten or fifteen years of the writer's experience. There were of course a great many gifted candidates in our pool of applicants, but about one-third to one-half were mediocre at best, and these students received equally glowing commendation. One might read three such intoxicated letters regarding an applicant who could not compose a coherent complex sentence, and whose transcript showed that there had been no college-level instruction in mathematics or science or language or philosophy or history.

And that was, of course, the inevitable and inherent counterpart to the inflation of grades--a devalued curriculum and debased standards of achievement. There was a general retreat from required courses, or sequences of courses, and from the ideal of a general liberal education. What was most troubling was that the liberalization of the curriculum seemed to have nothing behind it, aside from the pious notion that coercion deadens enthusiasm which in turn inhibits learning. Those in favor of a core curriculum seemed too disheartened or confused to argue their case persuasively. Perhaps the most depressing experience I can remember from that period was listening to a general faculty discussion on whether we ought to institute a new bachelor's degree, the only purpose of which seemed to be to enable some students to escape requirements they found noxious, especially languages. Listening to that listless discussion made it clear that many of the faculty could no longer "remember the answers," that the vision of a

liberal education had been eclipsed, and that the only arguments being brought forth were crassly utilitarian--that languages were useful acquisitions, and the like. Yet one also knew that most of those sitting there so mutely could achieve a Churchillian eloquence in defense of other and narrower propositions, for example that their department absolutely had to have two instead of one course in non-parametric statistics.

As we all know, the colleges not only offered junk courses of their own, but by lowering admissions standards, encouraged the high schools to use junk courses for admission to the university. Or was it the other way around? Do the high schools, through their failure to educate their students adequately, make them unfit for college work? There is no way we will ever answer those questions, except to agree that each pulled the other down, and despite some grumbling here and there, neither objected too vehemently to the pulling down. In all likelihood, both secondary and higher education were being responsive to the same obscure but compelling forces in American life, which involved a peculiar mixture of inflated self-esteem on the one hand, along with an exhaustion of will on the other.

II. Remedies

The American zeal for education provides the energy for programs of innovation and reform. It is hard to think of another country where we find so many proposals for the improvement of schooling. The zest for reform was evident throughout the post-war period and, as always, reflected larger social and ideological preoccupations. The Conant Report was one of the most influential documents in this century's history of education, in helping to establish as normative the idea of a consolidated high school able to offer all students the abundance of opportunities so often not available in smaller and more provincial schools. A second landmark event was the Sputnik "crisis," which led to substantial improvements in the scientific curricula, and an infusion of Federal money into mathematics, science, and technological education. These were Establishment ventures, in that their intention was to strengthen the existing system, rather than to overturn it. In no sense were the aims utopian; they were within reach, given sufficient energy and effort, and in both cases the goals were readily achieved, and became an enduring part of the American pattern of education.

The movements for reform which succeeded these--let us place them in time from about 1960 to about 1975--are not so briskly characterized, since they move in many different directions. But they can be placed into two general categories, which we will call "technological" and "liberationist." The technological direction encompasses a wide variety of proposals, some narrow, some quite far-reaching, wherein we find some effort to manipulate the materials or specific processes

of leafning. The simplest examples involve exploiting for the classroom technical devices originally developed for other purposes. The use of cassette tapes for language and other instruction is one obvious example, as is the use of closed-circuit television in the classroom. In most instances these techniques are meant to hasten learning or extend it, but do not aim at any radical transformation of the teaching process. Although their introduction is often announced by inventors and early enthusiasts as "revolutionary," they generally survive as ancillary methods woven into the quotidian activities of the classroom.

There are other modes of technology which are--potentially--more ambitious and even radical in intention. The microcomputer is one such device--again, potentially--in that it may have the capacity to transform the very processes of learning, though whether it will do so remains to be seen. Another approach which is "technological" is programmed learning, through the systematic use of reinforcers (à la Skinner), and its close cousin "contract teaching." Though neither of these necessarily involves mechanical or electronic devices, their aim is to rearrange and rationalize the learning process itself, basing themselves upon a technology of response acquisition. The Skinnerian and other behavioral approaches to education were at their inception utopian, in that they promised not merely the transformation of the classroom, but a formula for the re-making of human behavior in society itself. These approaches have, however, proved themselves adaptable, in that they can be borrowed from piecemeal. It is my impression that the Skinnerian emphasis these days is seen in a more deliberate effort on the part of classroom teachers to reward students, both in general and as they acquire specific skills.

It is the second direction of reform--the liberationist--which had a more profound initial impact on education. These movements define themselves as radical. They see as a major aim of education to undo the constraints imposed by excessive socialization. They believe that conventional child-rearing chains the "true self," and with it creativity and the capacity to learn easily and joyously. Conventional education then reinforces that enchainment; it merely completes what traditional child-rearing has left undone. Liberationist writing posited--at times merely implied--a "true self" which is essentially virtuous; and it is that optimism about human nature, that tacit denial of original sin, which was part of its attraction in an era marked by political utopianism. The movement was often thought to stem from Dewey, in that it aimed to be "progressive"; my own view is that much of the time it donned Deweyan colors much as a wolf may dress himself in sheep's clothing. The immediate sires of most post-war progressive writing were A.S. Neill, Wilhelm Reich, and Paul Goodman. The ultimate progenitor is Rousseau (or some sides of him), and before him the Gnostics and Cathars.

Liberationist writing was a bold attempt to redefine the purpose and practice of education, in part by redefinitions of human psychology. The student was to be seen not as recalcitrant, but as avid (under the correct circumstances), and the teacher was to be seen not as a drill master, so much as a partner or inspirational leader. Subject matter was to take second place to the perfection of the self--the cultivation of sensitivity, creativity, and the like. The writing is by turns polemical, hortatory, and evangelical; it stands in sharp contrast to the modesty and cautiousness of formulation that we find in other presumably "experimental" writers on education, such as William James, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget.

Given these sweeping aims, aims which went far beyond "method" as we ordinarily understand that, there tended to be little concern with the actualities of the classroom and of instruction—John Holt (19) is an exception. Revolutionary movements tend to be both totalistic and sectarian, that is, on the one hand they aim to produce conversion in the auditor, and enlist him totally in the cause, and on the other, a sense of exclusivity develops within the movement itself. For these reasons, the new progressivism did not take over American schooling, far from it. It proved to be self-limiting. In those few communities where it enjoyed a large constituency, there might be some effort to satisfy it by offering special programs, or in some cases by setting aside one or two special schools. But it rarely went beyond that, since the more radical the program proposed, the more certain there was to be community resistance. My home town of Ann Arbor is quite instructive in this regard. It hired an ultra-progressive school superintendent, who was able to establish an open-classroom school at the elementary level, and two small liberationist high schools (one soft-shelled, the other hard-shelled), and do little else. The very fact of a liberationist regime meaning business served to mobilize the conservative elements of an extremely liberal university community, to the degree that they were able to elect a school board, and in time depose the superintendent and appoint a centrist administrator.

Yet I would not for a moment want to imply that the liberationist movements were without effect; to the contrary, they were to be deeply influential. They were able to give credence and respectability to the idea that the cultivation of "the total personality" was as important a goal as the acquisition of subject matter and of cognitive

skills. Hence it became easier to establish coursework on such topics as "family living" and "personal adjustment" in lieu of conventional offerings in history and the social sciences. By far the major impact of liberationism was the adversary stance it took to the existing system of public education, and to those who taught and managed in that system. The messages of the movement were these: the schools are extremely dull places for the young; the teachers were rigid and unimaginative, and could not engage the enthusiasm of their students; the secondary schools have as their essential but unspoken assumption keeping youngsters out of the labor market; hence they function as prisons, in that they contain an energetic population resentful of their confinement.

Yet even this fairly blunt paraphrase does not quite capture the contempt expressed towards schools and school teachers. One has to re-read these writings to recall the tonalities (here again I think most of us suffer from some amnesia). The depiction of the ordinary school and the ordinary teacher is supercilious and at times scurrilous: these are held to be mean-spirited people servicing mean institutions. Often the writer offers himself as exemplary, though of course with the usual moues of humility or self-irony. The contrast is made with some hack or dragon or tyrant. The author's students learn more, are more creative, are suffused with the joy of learning, and love their teacher almost beyond words. These writers were generally young and viewed themselves as maverick. But we saw precisely the same attitudes in Establishment figures, such as Charles Silberman who, in an extremely influential book, Crisis in the Classroom (19), takes a position which Lerner, quite correctly, characterizes as extremist in rhetoric and messianic in claims.

Nevertheless the climate of the times was such that these diagnoses of American education proved to be persuasive to elite opinion, soon found their way into the mass media, became conventional wisdom, and ultimately were enshrined in the teaching of the education schools. There was little countervailing argument. If you look through the holdings of a good public library, or a good used bookstore, you will find, abundantly, the books by Silberman, Holt, Kohn, Kozol, Friedenberg, Goodman, Herndon, Lennard. You will find hardly anything from that era by writers representing a contrary position. If you survey the journals of opinion of that time, you find little attention given to problems of primary and secondary education, and what little there is sympathetic to the reform outlook. Most such journals limited their attention to the universities, or to the political problems in the primary and secondary schools, especially integration and busing.[4]

This disdainful depiction of the American school teacher did grievous damage to the self-esteem of a group many of whom were already uncertain about themselves and their value--a group which was not seen as "professional," nor as "intellectual," nor as successful in worldly terms. That loss of self-regard made it especially difficult for them to demand a disciplined effort from their students. Having been portrayed as either drones or jailers made many of them yearn to be seen as the very opposite, as charistmatic teachers or as laid-back adolescents,

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[4] Daedalus, for example, published over a hundred articles on higher education during the quarter-century but until last year only a handful about the schools. The shining exception is Public Interest, which has published a steady stream of excellent articles by the most distinguished American writers on education.

neither role requiring or inspiring self-discipline on the part of the students. Young teachers in particular were tempted to embrace and exemplify the new values, and to serve as role models for advanced thinking. Here is Fred Bloom (1978), a brilliant young psychiatrist living in rural Maine:

> A teacher, a woman with twenty years teaching experience, resigned recently from the new community school in our town because she was expected to go on the "team" weekend encounter of the social-studies faculty. On the weekend, she told me, the faculty members play therapy games. Among other games, they lie on the ground and roll back and forth over one anothers' bodies to develop "closeness" and "trust" amon the team. "I went on it last year," she said, "and besides, I can't see why, after twenty years, I have to be shown how to get along. But really, you can't get along at that school unless you go in for that kind of thing."

The liberationist school has lost influence, at least for the moment. One suspects its success would not be repeated today--not only because of obvious changes in the political climate, but also because we would now insist that some evidence be provided. If such bold claims were made today, we would surely ask: Is that so? Who said so? Do you have findings? Please show them to me. During the last decade no serious discussion of educational policy has proceeded very far without some genuflection to the facts--even when we recognize that most of the time the facts are used to justify positions already taken. Nevertheless, the appeal to findings, though it has its limits and corruptions, nevertheless makes it difficult to keep discourse at an entirely sentimental level.

What the new empirical literature has shown is in a sense startling, in that it has confirmed many banal, common sense, and traditional beliefs about the sources of effective teaching--that learning tends to flourish in schools governed by a strong and unified

teacher symbolized larger and more splendid liberations which were to take place throughout the world. The other dominant movement of reform was, as we have argued, overly preoccupied with technique. It felt that schooling could be improved by the use of modern devices, or of new information on the rationalization of learning.

Both these approaches elided what we now see as central to sustained academic achievement--the internal morale marked by effort, drive, and persistence supported by purposeful leadership in the schools. The libertarian theorists either ignored those elements altogether, or assumed that it would be evoked by the unbinding of a thwarted inner goodness. The technological theorists also ignored it, at least much of the time, or assumed it would be evoked by the right machine, or an up-to-date syllabus, or by scientifically devised methods of learning. Neither of these positions is altogether false, yet we can see how illusory they were. Although both positions are now in some decline, they are by no means eclipsed. They draw upon two of the deepest and most enduring themes in American thinking--the idea of perfectability, and the love of technique--and one can expect that sooner or later, in one form or another, and for better or worse, these ideas will once again be felt in the American theory of education.

III. Merit and Equality

During the second half of the quarter-century, our conception of equality began to be transformed in ways which were to be extremely important for education. That idea has had, needless to say, a long provenance in American political history, indeed so long and complex and tortuous as to discourage any effort here to trace it, even summarily. The interested reader may want to consult Lakoff's Equality in Political Philosophy (19) for an extensive discussion of the history of the idea, or Eastland and Bennett's Counting by Race (19) for a cogent analysis of equality in relation to racial preference.

"Equality" has been so obsessive a theme during the post-war era that we are liable to think of it as a permanent feature of our political landscape. Yet it has been a central issue--politically and intellectually—only at certain moments of our history. It gained vigor and attention in the 1950's, with the explosive growth of the civil rights movement. During that period, equality came to mean racial equality--to end systematic discrimination against blacks, particularly the denial of electoral rights and the sanctioned pattern of segregation in schools and public facilities. These struggles won, indeed with surprising ease, the quest for equality moved ahead, towards the achievement of equal opportunity in such areas as schooling, housing, and work, and to the extension of equality to other putatively disadvantaged groups, primarily women.

These extensions of equality enjoyed widespread and enthusiastic assent, certainly among the educated and among political liberals. But in the late 1960's we began to see not so much an extension as

a transformation of the earlier idea of equality. Though that transformation drew upon some of the most ancient utopian ideals (see Cohn, Pursuit of the Millenium [19] and Manuel and Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World [19]), it represented a startling new departure in the American political context and, as we will see, generated a bitter and continuing struggle among intellectuals. The notion of equality of opportunity involved what the late Charles Frankel (19) termed "corrective egalitarianism"--the idea that a primary aim of social policy is to remove or modify those circumstances that disadvantage some classes of citizens. One might, for example, provide financial subsidies so that poor but able youngsters could attend college. One might even strive to eliminate poverty altogether, by income guarantees for the poorest members of the nation, so as to reduce those economic inequities which hobble the latent talents of those born to impoverished families. That mode gave way to what Frankel termed "redemptive egalitarianism." Whereas in the earlier understanding, one sought to give each player a more or less equal chance to succeed, in the newer conception, the fact of inequality itself was seen as unjust, in that it derived from external circumstances that favored one player over another, or from the presence of internal qualities--intelligence and drive--which the player had not "earned," or because it was itself capricious, the result of good luck and little more. That being the case, one could not say that a given person was morally more deserving of good fortune than another; and that being the case, the aim of social policy is to minimize differences in fortune or privilege stemming from differences in achievement. The shorthand formula is now familiar: from equality of opportunity to equality of result.

The new position on equality was stated elegantly in one of the few philosophical books in our era to become famous: John Rawls' A Theory of Justice (19), which was--as all commentators have agreed--a book of remarkable originality. As Frankel said, the author's purpose--"which is nothing less than to overturn two centuries of empirical, utilitarian, and positivistic philosophies"--is "breath-taking." Yet the popularity of the book among the educated, the quickness with which it seized the attention of intellectuals, had less to do with its originality than with the way it centered upon the ideal of equality. In a long, brilliant, and withering critique of the book, Robert Nisbet (19) argued that the "passion for equality, first vivid at the time of the Puritan revolution, has been the essential mark of every major revolution in the West" and has in particular been the "mainspring of radicalism." Hence in an era such as the late 1960's, in which a great many intellectuals deemed themselves revolutionary, one would expect to find the wish to celebrate a book of great intellectual power itself celebrating a revolutionary idea of equality.

Rawls' new doctrine did not long escape scrutiny. By drawing such considerable attention, it evoked almost immediately some brilliant displays of contra-egalitarian writing, the most famous being Robert Nozick's prize-winning Anarchy, State, and Utopia (19) which, roughly speaking, did for libertarianism what Rawls had done for egalitarianism. However, the main thrust of the response to Rawls came not from the libertarian movement but from the intellectuals commonly categorized as neoconservative, those associated with Commentary and Public Interest--Daniel Bell (19), Irving Kristol (19), Daniel Patrick Moynihan

(19), Charles Frankel (19), Robert Nisbet (19), to mention only a few. The major intellectual debate of the early 1970's pitted these writers against the egalitarians. The issues debated were pivotal in the fission between intellectuals in the post-war era, entirely comparable in gravity and scope to the debate about the Cold War in the late 1940's. As we might expect, the debate about equality involved, as a leading issue, a fierce argument about education.

In the traditional understanding of equality, it was posited that economic and other disadvantages acted to constrain the appearance and expression of talent. Jefferson's "natural aristocrats," ordinarily lost to the world by the accidents of privation, were to be uncovered by universal education. Schooling for all was to serve two aims--raising the level of literacy and competence in the general population; and bringing into cultivation those talents that would otherwise have lain fallow. The infusion of Federal money into higher education after the Second World War has served both goals: college training was made available to large numbers of young men, and an elite education was offered to those who qualified by virtue of intellectual merit.

Soon after the war ended, the prestigious private colleges and universities began to give up the exclusion of students by religion, ethnicity, and social background. Much the same happened at the graduate and professional level and in the recruitment of college faculty. That change took place quickly and for the most part silently--without litigation, protest, or government intervention, as though an agreement had been arrived at tacitly, based on a sense of social justice, and a reckoning of the nation's needs. The example of Nazi Germany was a sufficient warning of the long-range effects of

social bigotry. And beyond that, the country became aware--as did other nations--that its technical progress would depend upon the cultivation of intelligence, and that the great universities could no longer be enclaves restricted by class and caste.

The effect of that tacit decision was to open the great universities to groups previously excluded or restricted--the Jews most visibly, but also that majority of the American population which had not been so much excluded as discouraged. Access was determined by accomplishment rather than by membership in favored social groups; and accomplishment (or its potential) was determined by objective and universalistic means.

That was the onset of an era of merit. One can find it taking place in almost all industrialized countries. That evolution--from ascription to achievement, and from particularism to universalism--is a fundamental tenet in this sociological theory of modernity. (See Parsons, 19 and Bell, 19 inter alia). One might even want to argue that in some ways the American system has been more or less meritocratic than most, and that there are far more openings available in higher education than in any other country, and that the culling takes place late and is less rigorous. We have had no equivalent of the British 11-plus examinations, nor have we had anything to approach in rigor the Japanese and French examinations for entrance to the university. But the opening of our universities proved to be a major reason for the extraordinary vitality which marked American intellectual, scientific, and artistic life during the post-war period. This country achieved leadership in many of the arts and humanities, and in almost all of the natural and social sciences, and did so much of the time by

a seemingly effortless succession of European emigres by native talent. And if one looks closely at our indigenous "second generation" of extraordinary achievement--Nobel laureates, for example--we find that it is made up in significant degree of the previously excluded and discouraged, the ethnics and provincials.

Nevertheless, the hegemony of merit proved to be surprisingly brief. Not that it was abandoned--it is hard to imagine that happening entirely in any technological society, nor for any length of time. Yet it did lose its primacy, that unspoken assent previously given by all significant strata of the society. The term "meritocracy" soon came into use among the adversary elites, that term used pejoratively, or dismissively, certainly without much loving kindness. The meritocracy, it was implied, was composed not of the meritorious but of those who had the knack of taking tests, or making the right moves in school, or ingratiating themselves with selection committees. Furthermore, the tests themselves were suspect, in that there was said to be no clear relationship between doing well on them and doing well later in life. Nor was there much relationship between doing well in school and later success. Perhaps success was a matter of luck, no more than a roll of the dice. That idea that social mobility was fortuitous, was the theme of one of the most influential books of the period, Christopher Jencks' Inequality (19), based upon his analysis of the first Coleman study.

These critiques might not have had so powerful an influence had it not been for race, which proved once again to make the American case different from those of comparable countries. What would otherwise have remained an argument about social class and social mobility became

an argument about race, and in so doing inherited our country's complex historical legacy of racial division and bitterness. The conflation of race and class produced, among many other things, a fierce attack on intelligence testing, largely because of the false assumption that most psychometricians held blacks to be genetically inferior in intelligence. Hostility to IQ testing--much of it ignorant, or uninformed, or based on the inflation of half-truths--was then generalized to other forms of aptitude and achievement testing. That hostility soon extended to the very idea of intelligence as a measurable attribute. A dogmatic environmentalism came to dominate most discourse on these matters among social scientists, and among much of the educated public. Differences among individuals, especially in capacity, were held to be due to socialization alone, unless proved otherwise--and the conditions for proving otherwise were essentially impossible to meet. With the passage of time, the rhetorical ante was raised, in that the arguments for equality became ever more shrill. The elegant moral reasoning of a Rawls and the intricate analyses of a Jencks gave way to the vulgarity of William Ryan's Equality (19), which holds that measured variations in intelligence are a scam devised by the "very rich" to swindle the rest of us.

It was a climate in which the idea of merit could not survive, at least not the belief that native gifts, cultivated by learning and effort, would produce achievement and reward, the fruits of which would ultimately add to the common good. Instead the following propositions became commonplace: .Achievement has little to do with talent, nor with effort, nor with schooling. Differences in ability are a fiction, or are not measurable, or are a kind of confidence trick. The ruling class

makes sure that the system is rigged to protect its own kind. The gifted can take care of themselves, or are the products of special privilege, or are in any case not worthy of admiration or special attention. There is no reason to stress cognitive skills over all others, since to do so is a bourgeois prejudice, since it takes as much intelligence to survive on the street as to solve quadratic equations.

These propositions were not often stated quite so crudely, but stated they were, and they helped establish a moral and intellectual ambience in which striving, self-discipline, and the intellectual life itself came to be devalued. That in turn produced a loss of morale which was to diminish the moral energy of the public schools.

IV. Values

Beginning in the middle 1960's, a great many parents became aware that something was going awry in the schools. Those with children in the middle or high schools could recognize symptoms of demoralization and loss of purpose: that drugs were sold openly and that school authorities were not doing much about it; that courses in math, science, and languages were disappearing; that students were rarely asked to write, and were given little work to bring home. Parents also began to feel that they could not get their concerns acted upon. On issues of discipline, the school principal might say that his hands were tied because of new developments in the law, or because the schools were wary of litigation. On the issue of a softened curriculum, they might point to changes in college entrance requirements, or utter pieties about bringing education up to date and keeping it in tune with the times, leading the parents to feel that they were back numbers. Or the principal might agree, wholeheartedly, then go on to say that things were not what they once were, that students were less manageable, less motivated, and that many families had become indifferent to the academic progress of their children.

That parents, and the general public, were becoming disenchanted with the quality of public education is evident from trend statistics collected by the Roper Organization during the last quarter-century.[5] These show a striking loss of confidence in the local schools during the period we are considering: In 1959, 64 percent of Americans felt

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[5]The statistics that follow are taken from the invaluable summaries published by Public Opinion magazine. (

that public education was doing an excellent or good job. That figure declined to 48 percent by 1978. Most of the drop took place between 1967 and 1971, where the proportion giving a favorable rating declined by eleven points, from 61 to 50 percent. We can infer what may have been involved in that loss of confidence from the Gallup figures on discipline in the schools. Those believing that the schools are too lax jumps from 39 percent in 1969 to an extraordinary 84 percent in 1978--about as close to unanimity as anyone ever achieves in opinion polling. That conclusion receives distinct support from the potential targets of disciplinary toughness--the high school students themselves, a majority of whom report as "big problems" the following: classroom disturbances (64%), marijuana use (60%), theft (56%), and vandalism (52%).

The remedies proposed for the schools also show some startling changes. There is a sharp increase in sentiment for a greater amount of homework for high school students, from 39 percent in 1965 to 63 percent in 1978. Many students themselves agree: 48 percent think the work is not hard enough, contrasted with 23 percent who believe it is too hard. Finally, there is a striking jump in the number favoring competence testing: from 50 percent of the general public in 1965 to 82 percent in 1978. Once again, the students agree: In 1977, 65 percen favored a standard examination to earn the diploma, as against 35 percent who were opposed.

These findings offer some compelling testimony: that the public disaffection about the schools has been felt for well over a decade; and that there is nothing whimsical about it, that it has been responsive to the actual vicissitudes of American schooling, specifically

the easing of both academic and disciplinary demands. But what is most striking is the extraordinary cleavage it reveals between public and elite opinion on the schools. It is during the late 1960's where we begin to see a sharp decline in public confidence; and that is precisely when the liberationist writing of a few years earlier had come to dominate elite attitudes and then the media and ultimately educational practice. By the early 1970's, the public attitude had become cynical when not altogether hostile--the schools had been turned into a playpen, at times a dangerous one, where little serious learning took place. Yet these perceptions were either ignored or rejected by vanguard opinion, which found itself drawn to the views of Silberman or Friedenberg to the effect that the public schools were at best stultifying or at worst the moral equivalent of Orwell's Room 101. Though it was rarely put this way, the schools were felt to be havens of rather dreary lower-middle-class sensibility, lacking the presumed spontaneity and freedom of lower-class life, or the sensitivity and sophistication to be found in upper-middle-class milieux.

In one form or another that cleavage continues--it is one of the most striking aspects of American education today, that there is so little agreement on what is wrong with the schools, how it came about, and what if anything ought to be done about it. The public's sourness about local schooling--now beginning to change, though rather slowly--is simply not shared by a great many experts in education, who may agree that there has been a decline in quality, but take it in stride, seeing it as the price to be paid for universal education. The effort to raise the level of achievement by a more focused means of instruction will produce complaints about "repression." The second

Coleman report, which was greeted by many with a shrug of the shoulders, as involving little more than a demonstration of the obvious, generated a savage response from many in the education establishment, in part because of the ostensibly hard line it implied about discipline. Nor is it the question of quality alone that divides opinion. Shall we teach morality in the schools, and if so, how? The struggle on "values clarification" between some teachers and some parents has turned on the claim of the latter that under the pretext of teaching children how to think about moral issues, a program of moral relativism has in fact been inserted into the curriculum. The occasional disputes about sex education provide another example: Though the opinion polls show that most people--even those calling themselves conservative--approve of the idea of teaching youngsters about sexuality, a great many parents become uneasy or oppositional if they come to believe that more than information is being conveyed, that social attitudes they find offensive are being taught as well.

These disputes are by no means new to the schools, which have always been an arena for the playing out of arguments about values and ideologies. Nevertheless, these quarrels now seem more intense than before, and seem to involve a larger range of issues. We may well have seen, since the middle 1960's, some loss of consensus as to the functions of the schools, and on the values they are meant to embody and teach. If so, that loss of consensus would have to do with a widespread shift in values among the population at large, from "materialist" to "post-materialist" values. Portents of that change by social theorists for many years, and the early appearances were noted by some of our keenest social scientists, in David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd (19), in Daniel

Bell's writings on the post-industrial society (19), and in the work of the psychologist Abraham Maslow (19). These early observations have more recently been supported in a variety of studies, most significantly in Ronald Inglehart's The Silent Revolution (19), which presents data from most of the industrialized countries of the West. As these nations advance into a more affluent, post-industrial society, one less dominated by economic survival and fears of scarcity, material values lose their hold over large segments of the citizenry--especially those cohorts which are young and have enjoyed higher education--and are replaced by a greater emphasis upon aesthetic, intellectual, and communitarian values. It is a trend visible in all developed societies, and most striking in the most prosperous of them--Belgium, the U.S., and Switzerland--and much less so in poorer countries such as Italy and Ireland. Certain political movements--enrivonmentalism, for example, both here and abroad--can be understood fully only if we keep in mind the more general changes in sensibility they rest upon.

Of course it is not at all clear whether this shift in values will survive the moment, or more precisely, will survive the current worldwide economic recession. Certainly some of the more flamboyant claims made for a new level of consciousness, as by Herbert Marcuse and Charles Reich, now seem--to put it generously--overstated. Nevertheless, it seems quite evident that the emergence of these new values--transient or not, deeply rooted or not--had some considerable consequences for American education, not merely because new values always tend to jostle the status quo, but even more so because in this case they provided the agenda for a new and assertive constituency in American life.

That constituency is made up of a significant social cadre, often called the New Class--occupationally centered in government, education, journalism, and higher education, of extremely high educational attainment, and usually from affluent and highly educated families. It considers itself to be a part of or at the least allied to the intelligentsia. The growth and evolution of this cadre was sensed, with an uncanny prescience, by a number of astute observers--Joseph Schumpeter and George Orwell, for example, but most strikingly in some early essays by Lionel Trilling, who noted its adversarial tendencies, its sense of affiliation with those elements in the literary and political culture which were hostile to the given order, which in American terms meant the business culture.

These intuitions about the New Class, which have often been dismissed as either speculative or tendentious, have now been confirmed in some remarkable social research by Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter comparing the views of the media elite (journalists working for prestigious newspapers, magazines, and television networks) with a group of high level corporate executives. As we might expect, the former are more liberal on political and economic issues, and show more cynical attitudes towards American institutions. But the most substantial differences, by far, are to be found in relation to moral questions--homosexuality, abortion, adultery--where the journalists give "liberal" responses three to four times as often as do the business executives.

Each group takes an adversary stance towards the other. Each sees the other as too influential, and itself as too little, so each

would like to replace the other in influence. That competition involves more than pride of place. Though it is an argument about politics and economics, it is also a struggle as to which values will be ascendant--the ideal of self-restraint on the one hand, and of individualism on the other.

These differences, so strongly separating two segments of the upper bourgeoisie, are important to us not merely because these are strong and willful elites, but even more so because they reflect a far more general dispute about values, and because that dispute has taken place, partially, in and about the schools. The mainstream culture fears the schools may be captured by those who, out of a misguided sense of compassion, are unwilling to make those demands necessary for the child's intellectual and moral growth. The modernist culture fears they are and will remain academics which sustain the mercenary, authoritarian aims of the heartless elements of American society.